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So my first interview was with Peggy Marie Prochnow, and I did that horrible thing they always do on TV shows, where I didn't tell anybody why I was there, just to send me Peggy Marie when she got to school.

She was white around the eyes when she showed up (7:30, plenty of time before the first bell), like I was every monster she'd ever imagined being under her bed. Which was pretty much what I expected. All teenagers have a persecution complex, and about three-quarters of the time, they're right.

Peggy Marie always looks to me like she should be modeling for Aryan Youth posters: tall and blonde, with those orthodontically perfect white teeth and bright blue eyes. And she's one of those girls who just radiates, I don't know, *health* or something. I hope for her sake high school isn't her glory days, but I'll understand what happened if it is.

"Good morning, Peggy Marie," I said. "Sit down, please."

She sat, on the very edge of the chair, and stared at me like a rabbit.

"You're not in any trouble, honey. I just need to ask you about Vernon Weatherbee."

And I watched her face. She was as transparent as a window pane, and I knew right off that she hadn't had anything to do with Vernon Weatherbee's death. Which I hadn't thought she had, but I'd been wrong about stranger things.

"Did Mrs. Weatherbee make you come down here?" she said, and she was indignant, but also upset. "Because I swear I wasn't lying, Sheriff. I didn't see Vernon at all after school yesterday."

"But you're dating?"

She made a face. "Sometimes. Sort of? I mean, I like Vernon and all, but . . ."

"But?"

"Vernon says he doesn't want to be 'married.'" And her air-quotes were sarcastic and hurt, both mocking Vernon and full of the memory of being mocked. "So sometimes we're dating and sometimes we're not."

"Depending on what Vernon wants, huh?"

"Oh god." Her face crumpled for a second, the toddler Peggy Marie shining through the teenager, but then she pulled herself up. "But why are you asking about Vernon? Is something wrong? Did he get hurt?"

"I'm sorry," I said, and I glanced for a second at Linda Hogan, the principal's secretary, who'd ponied up to play witness that I wasn't sexually harassing Peggy Marie or something. "Vernon died last night."

Peggy Marie didn't take it in at first; then I saw all that healthy color start draining out of her face. "Dead? Was it . . . was it a car accident? I know he drives that Camaro way too fast."

"No, I'm sorry," I said, and I don't know if it says something about me or something about the job, but I was breaking the news of her boyfriend's death to a sixteen year old girl, and what I wanted most was to be able to write a note to myself about Vernon Weatherbee's Camaro. Because where the fuck was it?

"He didn't kill himself," Peggy Marie said; there were tears in her eyes, and her voice wobbled hard, but she was adamant. "Vernon Weatherbee did not kill himself."

"No, ma'am," I said, because she'd earned a *ma'am* from me. "He didn't."

As Peggy Marie started to cry for real, Linda Hogan got up and came around to her, and gave me a look that wanted to lay me out like roadkill. "That wasn't a nice thing to do, Sheriff."

"I know," I said. "But I needed to talk to her before she started crying."

Peggy Marie gulped hard and said, "You can talk to me now. I mean, what happened? Or is it like on TV where you can't tell anybody?"

"For now," I said, "I really can't tell you the details. I'm sorry." Because if Peggy Marie hadn't been our footprint girl, that girl was still out there, and my job would be about a thousand times easier if she didn't know we were looking for her.

She nodded and gulped again and said, "Mrs. Hogan, I'm sorry, but could you get me a kleenex?"

"Of course, honey," Mrs. Hogan said, with another death-glare at me.

Peggy Marie was still trying to hold it together; there was more iron in her than I'd expected. She sniffed hard and said, "Can I help somehow? I mean, do you need to know . . ." Her voice squeaked off into nothing; she took a deep breath and brought it down again. "Is there stuff you need to know?" And I guess my face showed just how dubious I was, because she said, "I mean it," and she sounded like she really did.

"Okay," I said. "If you didn't see Vernon after school yesterday, who would've?"

And god bless her, she told me. Mrs. Hogan came back and handed her a box of kleenex (and said acidly to me that the principal wanted to know when she could make the necessary announcement or did they need to get me a copy of the Freedom of Information Act first?), and Peggy Marie blew her nose and gave me the rundown of Vernon Weatherbee's friends. She got the hiccups halfway through, but she stayed the course.

So I spent the rest of the morning interviewing football players. People make jokes about growth hormones in the milk, but sweet merciful Jesus on stilts, I'm not sure it's a joke anymore.

I didn't find anyone who'd admit to seeing Vernon after football practice was over, around five-thirty, but Howard Pulaski gave me a good description of Vernon's car (and confirmed that, yes, he was driving it yesterday--trust a car nut), and Freddy Carmody, who was the only one of the bunch man enough not to care that I could see he was crying, told me the names of some of the girls Vernon "hung around with."

"I don't want to get anyone in trouble, Sheriff," he said, taking a kleenex from the box I pushed across the table at him.

"The only person who's in any kind of trouble is the person who killed Vernon," I said. "And we don't know who that person is. Don't have the first idea."

Freddy Carmody's smarter than you'd think to look at him; he's going to get to college on football, the way most African-American boys in Clayton County have to, and then I don't think he's ever going to look back. I don't blame him. He understood what I was telling him, that I wasn't on a witch hunt, and that being one of Vernon Weatherbee's girlfriends didn't make anybody a murderer. So he said, "Vernon had a lot of friends who were girls, and he'd go to movies and stuff, but I don't think he was dating anyone but Peggy Marie." And he gave me three or four names, and then he stopped and rubbed his face and looked at me again. "And I saw him once or twice with Alma Finnister, but I don't know *what* that was all about."

"Alma Finnister?" I said, sorting through my head to find a face to put with the name.

"Yeah, you know," said Freddy Carmody. "Crazy home-schooled Alma Finnister."

"Right," I said. "I'd forgotten she was starting at CCHS this year."

"Oh yeah," said Freddy Carmody, and that was all I got out of him about Alma Finnister.

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[Little guy's not bad.](#)

Gotta teach RHex to smear.

2 comments



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January 27 2009, 18:07:21 UTC

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Alma did it, she killed him. Those teenagers are smarter than they think they are or their teachers thinks they are, and they did the right thing.

Isn't it amazing what the people we think are stupid can do when they let themselves out of the box of oppression, and ask them the right questions, as you did, as an equal who's fighting for the right. If only the rest of society understood how to do what you're doing.

Peace.

 [after_nightfall](#)

January 27 2009, 20:41:15 UTC [COLLAPSE](#)

Alma knows something. With such a, um, sinister last name she almost has to. Maybe she goes to the Sutter place to meditate? Or maybe I should reserve judgement until I've actually "met" her.

Um, yeah, hi. *waves* I got here from  [truepenny](#). Interesting down-the-rabbit-hole life you have.